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ABSTRACT

A four-part heuristic model seeks to enhance teacher and student-writer awareness of the significance of the self as writer. The questions in the heuristic examine the relationships between the self and the self as writer, between the self and the subject matter, between the self and the audience, and between the self and the form of the composition. Exercises that teachers can use in conjunction with this heuristic include the completion of a writing inventory by the students and a discussion of the inventory in the classroom, writing and discussing short paragraphs about student problems with writing and writing teachers, and reading about the writing processes/difficulties of established or famous writers. (A writing inventory and the heuristic model for self-analysis in the writing process are attached.) (RL)

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SELF-HEURISTICS AND THE WRITER'S SELF DISCOVERY

by Joanne F. Petrick, Ohio Dominican College

The topic of my presentation today is "Self-Heuristics and the Writer's Self-Discovery." The usefulness of subject heuristics has been fairly well established. And, as Fred Pfister has explained, we have had considerable success with the audience heuristic in our composition classes. The next logical step, therefore, was to develop a heuristic model for writer analysis or self analysis in the writing process. And this is what I have attempted to do--accepting, always, two cardinal principles:

first: the "self" and, of course, the special creature labeled "self as writer" is a rather slippery creature--who is not always and easily capable of scientific analysis.

Second, and more importantly: this self is the very center of the writing process. In recent years, researchers in composition, such as Shaughnessy, Emig, and James Moffett, have acknowledged this primacy in studying the characteristics of the basic and beginning writer.

But the significance of self-as-writer needs to be brought more forcefully to the everyday composition classroom. Instructors need to understand and appreciate the, if I may use the term, "writing personalities" of their students when they set about increasing their students' grammatical and rhetorical competence, when they teach the writing process. And the students themselves must acquire a conscious awareness of who they are as writers in order to succeed in the composition course. Instructors' and, more immediately, students' knowledge of themselves as writers--this is what my heuristic model attempts to facilitate.

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The model is broken into four parts and correspondingly examines four relationships: the first, self/(as) writer; the second, self and subject; the third, self and audience; the fourth, self and form.

SELF/ WRITER

The first four questions of the first part of the model are these: What value do I put on writing as a skill? What myths and prejudices do I have about writing? What are my feelings about myself as a writer? What are my writing strengths? writing weaknesses?

These are broad, if pointed questions that seek to identify the writer in terms of the general art of writing. For some people, the answers might be easy, but most beginning composition students have never even articulated the questions, let alone considered realistic responses. However, the answers to these questions suggest important data about motivation to write; enjoyment of writing; self-esteem in terms of creativity, communication skills, and academic performance; past successes and failures in composition--all valuable data to consider and implement in the student's present writing environment.

The handout I gave you includes a copy of a Writing Inventory that I have used as a classroom exercise to teach this heuristic model; it is especially pertinent to this first part. The inventory rates students' responses to such statements as "Writing is a talent you are born with," "Everyone is born with the ability to be creative," "You have to have a large vocabulary to write well." After students complete this inventory, follow up

classroom discussion is geared at clearing up various myths and prejudices about writing, at reassuring them that everyone is born with creative potential, that everyone can channel their creativity into developing an effective, individual art of writing.

The last two questions in part one--What is my reason for writing? and What is my motivation for writing?--are intended as particular questions and thus need to be considered for each particular writing assignment.

"Reason" applies to the external circumstances of the writing event--for example, the student is assigned to write a comparison/contrast theme on roommates he has known. Correspondingly, "motivation" identifies the internal circumstances of the event --for example, the student wants a good grade, seeks pleasure in self-expression. Of course, sometimes the external reason (perhaps a given assignment) matches the motivation (the student's desire for achievement or pleasure). When there is no disparity between reason and motivation, chances are that the student will write a most successful paper.

SELF/SUBJECT

Part two of the model, Self/Subject, breaks down into two groups of questions: one which deals with the objective knowledge the writer has of the subject and one which deals with his feelings about the subject. The first group:

How much information do I have on this subject? How reliable are my sources of information? And Is this information sufficient?

These are, obviously, the very first questions students should answer when they are debating the potential fruitfulness

of a particular subject. Interest does not equal, nor can it replace information, and students need to be able to distinguish between interest and information--just because they are overwhelmed by Russia's dramatic surge through Afghanistan does not mean that they can write a paper explaining the causes or consequences of this event. What they might be able to do, however, is to write a paper expressing their feelings or fears about Russia's action--in this case, their feelings become the facts, the information for the paper.

In this vein, I often find that students need some initial help in learning to distinguish fact from feeling. Classroom exercises on this distinction are therefore useful.

But it is also important to realize and accept that one often has real feelings about a subject. The second set of questions probes this dynamic:

What are my feelings about this subject? How strong are they? How will they affect my writing on this subject? (If negative, how can I manage these feelings and accomplish the writing task?)

The student must bring to the surface her feelings about a subject because, inescapably, they will affect her presentation of that subject--they will determine her "coloring" of the subject, so to speak. Identification and acceptance of these emotions will, hopefully, enable the student to control them, wisely incorporate them or limit them in her paper.

Recently, a student of mine, when faced with the assignment of writing a persuasion paper on any topic of interest, decided

to write about why Cleveland, Ohio, is such a desirable place to live. She began by making a list and soon discovered that she had very few reasons for living in Cleveland--but her brainstorming did uncover a lot of negative feelings for her hometown. She then worked at coupling her negative feelings to objective negative facts about the city--and eventually wrote a paper about why a person would not want to live in Cleveland, Ohio. The point here is that her original feelings were obstructing her identification of facts such that she could not make any progress--until she accepted these feelings and put them to work for her.

In effect, a writer's approach to any topic is influenced by his emotions as well as by his information on the topic--although, admittedly, the ratio of fact to feeling is immeasurable and probably varies on each writing occasion. But identification and acceptance of the feeling is essential to the smooth operation of the writing process. Even if a student feels entirely negative about an assignment--although most instructors do try for some variety of interesting topics for their theme assignments--he should be allowed, encouraged^{ed} to jot down the reasons for his negativism as a preliminary exercise to the theme--or to talk them out with the^{instructor} just this much freedom most often eliminates or reduces to a manageable extent the negativism that might otherwise block the fact-gathering and writing itself.

SELF/AUDIENCE

Essentially, the Self/Audience section of this model simply reverses the focus of the corresponding section in the Audience Analysis heuristic that Fred Pfister just discussed. Since so

much of this self-analysis model concentrates on developing the writer's self-actualization in the writing process, the potential danger exists, it seems to me, in producing a composition that might become untenably egocentric. It is, therefore, important that the writer recognize the basic fact that she is attempting to establish a communication, an identification with a reader. The questions of Self/Audience assist the writer in focusing on and defining this relationship.

What are my knowledge and attitude about my reader--that is, what objective information do I have about my reader--and what are my ~~subjective~~ feelings about him/her?

What are our shared experiences, attitudes, interests, values, myths, prejudices?--that is, what do we have in common that will help bridge the gap between us? that will allow him or her to identify with and, therefore, be instructed by or persuaded by me? And, of course, ultimately, how can I work these elements of commonality into my composition?

What is my purpose(s)/aim(s) in addressing this audience? to entertain, to instruct, to persuade? Defining purpose at this point helps the writer to define mode or rhetorical pattern.

Question four naturally follows the implications suggested by question three: Is this (therefore) an appropriate audience for this subject?

Questions ^{five}~~four~~ and ^{six}~~five~~ are most essential: What role do I want to assume for this audience? What role do I want this audience to assume? Again, the answers to these questions get at

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decisions on form: mode, tone, and diction. In my teaching experience with these heuristics, once the student answers these last two questions, she feels freer to begin the composition.

Role identification specifically defines and delimits the nature of the writer-reader relationship and the expectations of that relationship. From the writer's perspective, this identification significantly reduces possible ambiguity or feared hidden expectations in the relationship, and, consequently, it makes the writer feel much more self-confident about developing her interaction with her reader.

SELF/FORM

The fourth part of the heuristic opens the question: what writing strategies work best for me? By virtue of our own writing and teaching experiences, we realize that each writer follows a process that works best for him or her. The first set of questions in this part explores this process.

In the pre-writing phase, some people can well utilize the free writing approach espoused by such advocates as Kenneth Macrorie and Peter Elbow. Some writers can be "turned on" by an idea which first appeared as a "kernel" in their daily journal or diary. Still others do their pre-writing entirely in their head--perhaps while driving to school, or taking a shower, or jogging through quiet neighborhood streets.

The same alternatives obviously exist for the composing process itself--an activity that Donald Murray has so aptly labeled "rehearsal." As Janet Emig's research has shown, not everyone can fit into the logical and neat outline system so

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mercilessly prescribed by so many teachers. If the student in this situation is like me, she has so much trouble deciding which goes where--the Roman numeral or the capital letter--that she often loses or temporarily mislays the essential information that is supposed to follow this numeral or letter.

Students who are comfortable talkers have often found that they can more easily compose by talking their subject aloud--or into a tape recorder if that is available. Again, some students can compose polished sentences, even paragraphs, and often effective introductions and conclusions entirely in their heads.

Many people compose or rehearse on paper, going through endless drafts--and even the begetting of these drafts can be complicated. Does one compose with a typewriter or a blue Bic pen or a number two pencil? On lined or unlined paper that could be any variety of color? Small, almost laughable problems, to be sure, but essential to consider when one is trying to write his best.

Editing of grammar, spelling, and punctuation can be done either internally while composing or externally on various drafts. And writers need to learn how to edit efficiently without impeding their composing process. For example, is it prudent to stop the paper to check the correct spelling of a word when one risks losing the thrust of a particular point? Each student must find the editing procedure which works best for him.

Finally, the all-important revising. How long must one put her paper away before she can re-read it with the desirable objective distance of a removed reader? Or can she revise well even while composing? And what kind of revising does the writer

perform? Can she assess the completeness and effectiveness of the rhetorical pattern? the completeness and effectiveness of the information in the paper? The appropriateness of the diction and tone?

These questions about the process of writing are obviously not questions that a writer must face each time that he is confronted with a composition assignment. Rather, they are generally designed to force the writer to consider--consciously and deliberately--what writing strategies can help him. A classroom discussion led by a teacher which discusses the various possibilities in the process--such as I have just suggested here--may trigger alternatives the student has never thought of before or may confirm for the student the validity of his own individual approach. In all cases, these questions allow for the fact and the rightness of the fact that each writer has a unique approach to the process of composition.

The second set of questions under the Self/Form heading are product-oriented: What pattern/mode/development is: (a) comfortable for me? and (b) appropriate for my audience and subject? What tone? What diction, level of diction? What level of syntactic sophistication? These last product-oriented questions assume that the writer is familiar with the basic rhetorical patterns and the distinctions of tone, word choice, and sentence structure, and that he is sufficiently experienced to make wise choices about them. Since such matters are traditional fare for most composition courses, these questions should

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not create overwhelming difficulties in implementing this heuristic model. Indeed, the questions provide a very practical context for studying matters of form because the writer needs to ask these questions each time that she embarks on a writing exploration.

EXERCISES

Time constraints only allow me to mention briefly the classroom exercises I am using to teach this heuristic to composition students. I have already introduced the Writing Inventory you have a copy of. Completing this inventory and subsequently discussing the variant responses in class has been fruitful in getting some basic issues covered about the Self as Writer.

Other exercises include writing a short paragraph in class on students' choice of two topics: "My Most Embarrassing Writing Experience in a Class" or "The Worst English Teacher I Ever Had." Either students can be asked to read these in class, or the teacher can read some of the papers. This exercise allows for the expression and release of a great deal of negativism, hostility, or embarrassment, and, ultimately, it frees students to make positive forward strides in their writing. In the February, 1980, issue of College English, Margaret Byrd Boegeman, speaking from her own teaching experience, confirms the value of using such autobiographical writing in fostering self-confidence for beginning writers.

One of my colleagues at Ohio Dominican has had gratifying success with showing his students samples of his own freshman compositions on an overhead projector. His point is that everyone can and usually does make mistakes when they are learning

to write, but everyone can learn to write. His students hear this message because of the candor of his approach; he becomes, for them, the "trusted adult" who will help foster their development.

Another similar exercise is to read to students excerpts from famous writers about how they write, even how they deal with rejection slips, in some cases. Again, this realistic candor makes the writing process seem more attainable for real human beings.

These are just a few ideas on how to put the Self-as-Writer Heuristic Model into gear. At this point, I can say that I am pleased with the results, although I realize that much more thinking and researching needs to be done. Finally, however, I am confident that such a focus on the self as writer is paramount in teaching composition.

Name _____

WRITING INVENTORY

Frequency/Fact of General Writing

1. Do you keep a journal or a diary? _____ yes _____ no
2. Do you write short stories or poems? _____ yes _____ no
3. Do you write frequent letters to family and/or friends (at least 5 letters a month)? _____ yes _____ no
4. Do you write frequently (once a week) in any other non-academic context--f.e., business letters, business memos, occasional essays, reports? _____ y s _____ no

College Writing

5. How long does it take you to write a 400-600 word theme? _____ less than 5 hours
_____ 5-10 hours
_____ more than 10 hours
6. Rate the following writing skills from 1-12, with 1 being the most important for you, and 12 the least important for you. Although some may seem to be of equal difficulty, assign only one number to each skill and use each number only once.

____ Putting sentences in the right order
____ Making the theme interesting
____ Finding a good idea
____ Spelling
____ Pleasing yourself with what you have written
____ Choosing the right words
____ Figuring out what to say about your idea
____ Deciding on punctuation
____ Putting words in the right order
____ Making the writing mean what you want it to say
____ Making grammar choices
____ Communicating your ideas to your audience
7. In your opinion, your grade on a college theme depends on (check all that apply):

____ the teacher's bias towards the subject of the theme
____ the teacher's bias towards you as a student
____ your ability to write a correct theme
____ your ability to write an interesting theme
____ luck
8. What factors influence how well you might write a particular theme (check all that apply)?

____ your knowledge on a particular subject
____ your ability to write grammatically correct papers
____ your ability to write interesting papers

WRITING INVENTORY, p. 2

- ___ your knowledge of your audience
- ___ your desire to please yourself as a writer
- ___ your desire to challenge your ability to perform as a writer
- ___ your desire to please your instructor
- ___ your confidence in yourself as a literate person
- ___ your confidence in your creativity
- ___ job pressures
- ___ grade pressures
- ___ personal pressures from family/friends
- ___ deadline pressures
- ___ pressures/demands from other classes
- ___ physical environment (such as sitting in the library to write
as opposed to sitting in your room; weather conditions)
- ___ personal health, state of rest, diet
- ___ time of day (such as early morning versus late at night)

For items 9-47, circle the response on the right that most nearly indicates your feelings about the statement.

Strongly Disagree = SD
Mildly Disagree = MD
Not Sure = NS
Mildly Agree = MA
Strongly Agree = SA

- | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|
| 9. An English teacher's main job is to correct students when they make mistakes in speaking or writing. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 10. An English teacher's main job is to encourage students to find the particular writing process that works best for them. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 11. An English teacher's main job is to teach students the rules of grammar and style. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 12. An English teacher's main job is to teach students to think analytically. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 13. An English teacher's main job is to teach students to write analytically. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 14. Studying grammar improves your writing. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 15. Writing courses are easy. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 16. High schools do a good job of teaching writing. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 17. On college writing assignments, you should be free to write about anything. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |

WRITING INVENTORY, p. 3

- | | | | | | |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|
| 18. Part of a grade should depend on how hard you worked on the assignment. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 19. The ability to write well is important in college. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 20. You have to write what your teacher wants to hear to get a good grade. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 21. Punctuation is important only on English papers. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 22. If other people understand your writing, that is more important to English teachers than errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 23. Most of what goes into a college theme is just stuffing to pad it out and make it sound good. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 24. It is not necessary to be interested in the topic to write a successful college theme. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 25. Writing is a skill that almost anyone can learn. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 26. Trying to fix writing only makes it worse. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 27. Short sentences are better than long ones. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 28. It is the writer's fault when you cannot understand his writing. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 29. Writing is a talent you are born with. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 30. Sincere, honest writing is good writing. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 31. A person can learn how to write by learning the rules of good writing. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 32. People who write well are more likely to be successful. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |
| 33. Good handwriting is important. | SD | MD | NS | MA | SA |

WRITING INVENTORY, p. 4

34. People who can't write well are not intelligent	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
35. It is easy to write about your personal feelings.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
36. If you know grammar, you know how to write.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
37. The only real difference between writing and talking is that writing is done on paper.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
38. You have to have a large vocabulary to be able to write well.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
39. It is easy to write about facts--like history or science.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
40. College-educated people are good writers.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
41. A composition that is well written is interesting to read.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
42. Proper spelling improves your writing.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
43. People who can read well can also write well.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
44. Reading literature helps your writing.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
45. Creative writing can help improve your theme writing.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
46. Creative writing is enjoyable.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
47. Everyone is born with the ability to be creative.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
48. Writing well makes you feel good about yourself.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA
49. The hardest part of a writing assignment is deciding on a topic.	SD	MD	NS	MA	SA

Thank you for completing
this inventory!

This Writing Inventory is an adaptation of a model used in Ohio State University's Remedial English Pilot Project (1977). It covers a lot of territory: students' assessment of cognitive and affective factors that influence their writing, students' assessment of writing teachers and the components of writing courses, etc. To date, I have not done anything "scientific" with accumulated data, but my classes do discuss the validity and variability of various answers after all students have completed the Inventory and their responses have been tabulated.

A HEURISTIC MODEL FOR SELF ANALYSIS IN THE WRITING PROCESS

SELF/WRITER

What value do I put on writing as a skill?
What myths and prejudices do I have about writing?
What are my feelings about myself as a writer?
What are my writing strengths? writing weaknesses?
What is my reason for writing?
What is my motivation for writing?
How does my physical environment influence my writing?
How do time factors (deadlines, time of day) influence my writing?
How does my physical health influence my writing?
How do my emotions influence my writing?

SELF/SUBJECT

How much information do I have on this subject?
How reliable are my sources of information (primary/secondary)?
Is this information sufficient?

What are my feelings about this subject?
How strong are they?
How will they affect my writing on this subject?
(If negative, how can I manage these feelings and accomplish the writing task?)

SELF/AUDIENCE

What are my knowledge and attitude about my reader?
What are our shared experiences, attitudes, interests, values, myths, prejudices?
What is my purpose(s)/aim(s) in addressing this audience?
Is this an appropriate audience for this subject?
What role do I want to assume for this audience?
What role do I want the audience to assume?

SELF/FORM

What writing strategies work best for me?
pre-writing?
composing?
editing?
revising?
What pattern/mode/development is: (a) comfortable for me?
(b) appropriate for audience and subject?
What tone?
What diction, level of diction?
What level of syntactic sophistication?